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ABSTRACT

Although self-esteem (SE) has been studied across the life span and across social groups, few studies have focused on the changes in self-esteem within a social group. To investigate the cohort and gender differences in SE in three-generational families (child, parent, grandparent generations), 6 members of 47 families (282 individuals) completed questionnaires assessing two operationalized factors of SE, i.e., power and worth. Each subject completed a modified semantic differential scale five times, to compare him/herself with each of the other five family members (adolescent siblings, parents, and grandparents). An analysis of the results showed that for all cohorts and both sexes, measures of worth were more stable across familial significant others than were measures of power. The parent generation was highest in stability of SE, while the younger generation was lowest in stability. The power dimension of SE reflected societal stereotypes, with fathers and grandfathers ranking the highest in the power dimension and female adolescents ranking the lowest in power. Since these results suggest that the middle generation father is the most influential member within intergenerational relationships, therapeutic intervention may wish to focus on his function and role, as a basis for group dynamic changes. (BL)

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COHORT AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MEASURES OF SELF-ESTEEM AMONG MEMBERS OF THREE GENERATIONAL FAMILIES[1]

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Abstract

Reported herein are the findings of a study of cohort and gender differences in self-esteem among 282 members of 47 three generational families. Two dimensions of self-esteem are investigated: power and worth. For all cohorts and both sexes, measures of worth are more stable across familial significant others than are measures of power. There also appear to be cohort differences in stability measures of self-esteem as well as gender and cohort differences in the power dimension of self-esteem.

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Introduction

Changes in self-esteem over the life span have been a primary focus in gerontological research during the past twenty years, partly because of the importance attached to it as a determinant of emotional well-being and adaptive behavior (Gurin, Veroff and Feld, 1960; Kaplan and Pokorny, 1970; Kuypers and Bengston, 1973; Neugarten, 1977; Zusman, 1966). While findings regarding the determinants of change in self-esteem over the life course are equivocal, there is support in the literature for the notion that a person's assessment of self is influenced to a large extent by his/her participation in different social groups or settings. In fact, ever since William James' (1950) classic dictum that we have as many "selves" as we have group memberships, social psychologists have endorsed the fundamental assumption that what a person experiences or evaluates as "self" is largely a reflexive product of interaction in a variety of social groups and settings (Cottrell, 1969).

The purpose of this paper is not to review research on changes in self-esteem, nor is it to challenge or test the notion that self-evaluations vary across social groups. Rather, the purpose here is to report findings of a study which explored whether measures of self-esteem are variable <u>within</u> a social group. More specifically, the paper addresses the question of whether differential self-esteem evaluations occur across significant others within a particular social group.

There are several reasons why this latter perspective is important. Perhaps one of the most important of these is that it may be more useful for human service professionals (e.g. therapists, counselors, etc.) to be aware of a person's differential self-evaluations across significant others within a social group than it would be to have information on such evlautions across social groups.

This would be particularly true if intervention efforts were aimed at promoting or facilitating behavior or attitudinal change within a particular group like the family.

Selected as the social group for investigating the question of intra-group differences in self-esteem measures was a variety of the modified extended family (Sussman, 1959): the three generational kinship unit represented by middle-aged parents, their adolescent offspring, and a grandparent generation residing apart from the parent and child generations. Other social groups could have been chosen, but it was felt that the multigenerational family setting would represent an interesting test of whether differential evaluations in self-esteem occur across significant others within a social group since the family is often cited as the social setting in which people report feeling the most authentic and real (Thomas, Gecas, Weigert and Rooney, 1974).

Research Questions and Rationale for Hypotheses

Five research questions were addressed in this study. First, although self-esteem has been reported to be multidimensional in research focusing on different social groups as referents for self-evaluation (Osgood, 1962; Gecas, 1972; Thomas, et al., 1974), is the same true in instances where people use significant others as referents in self-evaluations within a social group like the family? Second, if self-esteem is multidimensional in this intra-group instance, what are these dimensions? Are they similar to ones which have been reported on self-evaluations across different social groups (e.g. power and worth)? Third, are some dimensions of self-esteem more stable than others when comparisons are made across significant others. Fourth, are there cohort or generational differences in stability measures of self-esteem? That is, are some generations in the family more likely than others to have stable self-evaluations

across significant others? And fifth, are there any cohort or gender differences in self-esteem regarding comparative assessments of power or potency?

The Multidimensionality and Stability of Self-Esteem

Over twenty years ago, Osgood (1960) identified at least two salient dimensions of self-esteem: power and worth (herein referred to respectively as SE Power and SE Worth). More recently, in his cross-cultural research on adolescent socialization, Gecas (1972) has reported power and worth to be important dimensions of self-esteem. SE Power is a construct measuring a person's sense of efficacy or potency in the social environment. SE Worth is a construct connoting a sense of moral or social worth.

Turning now to the question of whether some dimensions of self-esteem are more stable than others, and assuming that self-esteem is multidimensional, it is instructive to note that Gecas (1972) has reported that SE Power is more variable (less stable) across different social groups than is SE Worth. While this variance is not great, Gecas theorizes that SE Power implies interaction with a social other, and as such will be more likely than SE Worth to vary from one social setting to another. Gecas (1972) does not discuss the SE Worth dimension as extensively as he does SE Power, but he implies that feelings of moral or social worth are not as contextually specific as are those of potency or efficacy. His post hoc theorizing concludes that, for whatever reason, SE Worth is less variable (more stable) across social groups and settings than is SE Power.

While Gecas' (1972) research leaves a number of questions unanswered, it does mark an important attempt to discover situational determinants of self-esteem. It also provides a basis in the present study for positing the

following hypothesis: As family members evaluate themselves in terms of self-esteem using significant others in the family as comparative referents, the dimension of SE Worth will show more stability than will SE Power.

Cohort Differences in Self-Esteem

There are very few theoretical or empirical clues regarding the way(s) in which cohort membership might influence an individual's comparative self-evaluations within a multigenerational setting. But the literature is not totally devoid of orienting ideas. For example, given that Erikson (1963) claims adolescent family members are at a critical developmental stage in identity formation, one could hypothesize that they would demonstrate less stability in measures of self-esteem than would their parents or grandparents. Assumed in this line of reasoning is that periods of identity formation are characterized by fluid definitions of the self, and as such are more apt to vary as the adolescent compares himself/herself with different significant others in the family.

Another way of looking at this is to assume that adolescent identity crises are consequences of the adolescent's anticipated need to enter and establish positions in a recognized and pre-existing adult social structure (e.g. becoming heads of household, entering the work force). It can be argued that the more solidly anchored people are in these adult social structures, the more likely they will be to demonstrate stability in their self-evaluations; or at least they will show comparably greater stability in such evaluations than persons who are less sure of their foothold in the adult world. If one assumes that members of the parent or middle generation are relatively more secure or solidly anchored in the social fabric and structure of adult life than are their adolescent offspring, then it can be hypothesized that their (the parents') self-esteem measures will be more stable than those of their adolescent children.

But what about the relative position of the parent and grandparent generations with regard to self-esteem measures? Kalish (1969) has argued in a persuasive way that members of the grandparent generation may find that their position in the social structure resembles that of their grandchildren more than it does their adult children (the parent generation). Many older adults are faced with the difficult task of re-defining their self-identity as they anticipate or experience forced or voluntary separation from important arenas of activity like parenthood and work. Ensuing declines in health and financial resources may place the older generation in roles increasingly characterized by dependency. All of these adjustments, while they may not be as dramatic or as intense as they are during adolescence, may nevertheless have the potential of requiring a marked redefinition of the self (see Rosow, 1974).

The forgoing ideas can be forged into the following hypothesis with regard to cohort or generational differences in the stability of self-esteem measures: The parent generation will demonstrate the most stability in self-esteem assessed across significant others, followed by the grandparent generation. The youngest (adolescent) generation will demonstrate the least stability in measures of self-esteem.

Gender Differences in Self-Esteem

Assessments of self-esteem across familial significant others, particularly with regard to the dimension of SE Power, may be postulated to have as determinants both sex and cohort membership. Although gradual shifts are occuring with regard to the role and status of women in society and in the family, females are still frequently cast in subordinate power positions vis-a-vis their male counterparts. This is particularly true among families in a religious sub-culture where a patriarchal family structure is advocated, as was the case in the present study.

If this gender difference in relative power is considered together with the notion that parents are generally more powerful than their children, and that a role reversal in terms of power and dependency often occurs between aging parents and their adult children (where parents become increasingly dependent on their adult children), then it is possible to hypothesize that the lowest level of SE Power will be demonstrated by the female adolescent, followed by the grandmother, then the mother, the male adolescent, and the grandfather. The father is hypothesized to be the highest SE Power.

Methodology

Sampling Procedures

Initially a purposive sample of 3,000 students was drawn representing the undergraduate student body population of a large western university. A short "postcard" questionnaire was mailed to these students in order to determine which of them were members of three generational families. Approximately 1,275 students returned the questionnaire, the results of which indicated that 160 were members of families in which there were at least six persons representing three generations: the university student, a younger adolescent sibling, the student's parents, and at least one set of grandparents (maternal or paternal). From this list of eligible families a sample of 65 was randomly drawn for the present study.

Data Collection

Having obtained the names and addresses of family members for each student, self-administered questionnaires were mailed to six members in each of the 65 families. One packet was mailed to the student, one to his/her parents and younger siblings, and one to his/her maternal or paternal grandparents. Each packet included a questionnaire, an instruction sheet, and a cover letter ex-

plaining the purpose of the study and offering assistance if it should be needed. Instructions requested family members to complete their respective questionnaires privately and not to discuss them with other family members until all of the questionnaires had been completed and returned.

Respondent Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 47 three generational families in which all six members completed and returned questionnaires. The average age for the younger generation (student and younger adolescent sibling) was 17.8; for the parent generation, 45.4; and for the grandparent generation, 70.2.

Operationalizing Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was operationalized using a modified version of a semantic differential scale used by Gecas (1972) and Thomas, et al. (1974) to derive self-esteem scores in their cross-cultural research on adolescent socialization. The scale originally employed by Gecas (1972) contained 12 bi-polar adjective pairs, each of which was set on a 5-point Likert-type scale. He administered the scale in such a manner as to allow the subject to respond to the scale once for each of several different social contexts (school, family, friends, etc.).

In the present study, the respondent completed the scale five times, once for each of five other family members (significant others) with whom he/she (the respondent) compared himself/herself on each scale item. In order to accommodate this requirement, several changes in wording were made. The number of adjective pairs was also reduced from twelve to eleven. Presented in Figure 1 below is an example of the self-esteem scale as it appeared on the

Insert Figure 1 About Here

university student's questionnaire. The scale in Figure 1 was completed by the student using his/her father as the comparative referent. The student also completed the scale for 4 other family members (mother, younger sib, grandfather and grandmother).

Findings

The Multidimensionality of Self-Esteem

In order to determine if the self-esteem scale used in the study measured multiple dimensions of esteem as had been the case in previous research (e.g. Gecas, 1972) and to identify these dimensions if they existed, the eleven scale items were factor analyzed using a program from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Nie, Hull, Jenkins and Bent, 1975). Three factors emerged from this analysis: power (5 scale items), worth (4 scale items) and attractiveness (1 item). One scale item, "wisdom", did not load discriminantly on either power or worth. Table 1 presents the factor loading structure for the scale using the three factor solution.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Comparative Stability of SE Power and SE Worth

As family members make comparative self-evaluations across familial significant others, it was hypothesized that the dimension of SE Worth would show more stability than SE Power. The rationale for this was that feelings of worth would not be as contextually specific as would those of power or potency.

To test this hypothesis, a self-esteem stability score for both SE Power and SE Worth was computed in three steps. Using SE Worth as an example, the first step was to compute a dyadic comparison score for each respondent in each

instance that they compared themselves to another family member by summing the values across the four SE Worth items in the scale. Second, a mean value for SE Power was computed for each respondent by summing his/her five dyadic compaison scores for SE Power and dividing by five. And third, a stability score for SE Worth was computed by summing the squares of the deviations of the respondent's five dyadic comparison scores for SE Worth from the mean valude derived in step two. The same procedure was used for computing a stability score for SE Worth and for a combined self-esteem stability score.

Presented in Table 2 are the mean stability scores for both SE Power and SE Worth for the entire sample. Mean stability scores by cohort (generation) and sex within generation are also given. For the entire sample, the mean stability scores for SE Power is 9.8, and for SE Worth 2.7. Since a high mean stability score is indicative of high variability (low stability), the conclusion is that SE Power, as hypothesized, is less stable than SE Worth when measured across significant others within the family. This also appears to be the case within cohort and gender categories.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Cohort Differences in Stability of Self-Esteem[1]

The fourth question addressed in the study concerned whether or not there was a pattern in differences in the stability of self-esteem measures according

[1]Prior to investigating cohort and gender differences in measures of self-esteem, one pre-requisite is to establish the fact that different family members (i.e. different generations and males versus females) are evaluating themselves along the same dimensions. Were this not the case, then meaningful comparisons would be impossible to make. In fact, failure to establish factorial invariance may indicate an age-sensitive or sex-biased instrument (Baltes and Nesselroade, 1973; Holter, 1983). The self-esteem scale was factor analyzed both across cohorts and for both sexes. The factor loading structure and three factor solution was similar in all cases. Copies of tables presenting these data are available from the first author.

to cohort or generation membership. It was hypothesized that the parent generation would show the highest stability in self-esteem measures across significant others in the family, followed by the grandparent generation. The lowest stability, it was felt, would be manifest by members of the youngest (adolescent) generation.

Stability in self-esteem was measured in the same manner described above for computing stability scores for SE Power and SE Worth, the only difference being that scale items measuring both power and worth dimensions were combined in computing the sum of the dyadic comparison scores. Table 3 below presents the mean stability scores for the combined measures of self-esteem broken down by cohort (generation).

Insert Table 3 About Here

Keeping in mind that a high score in stability is actually indicative of high variance and hence low stability, one can see that the relative order of these mean stability scores resembles the hypothesized pattern. That is, the lowest mean stability score (indicative of low variance and high stability) characterizes the parent generation (11.519). The next lowest mean stability score (indicating the next highest level of variance or level of stability) describes the grandparent generation (16.986). The highest mean stability score (indicating high variance and hence low stability in self-esteem assessed across familial significant others) is demonstrated by the youngest (adolescent) generation (18.065).

Gender and Cohort Differences in SE Power

The fifth and final question concerned whether or not there were gender and cohort differences in the SE Power dimension of self-esteem. Based on the

notion that females in our society are comparatively less powerful than males, that parents are generally more powerful than their children, and that a role reversal in terms of dependency may occur between aging parents and adult children, it was hypothesized that the lowest SE Power scores would characterize female members of the youngest generation (female adolescents), followed by female members of the oldest generation (grandmothers), then female members of the middle generation (mothers), male members of the youngest generation (male adolescents), and male members of the oldest generation (grandfathers). The male members of the middle generation (father) were hypothesized to have the highest SE Power scores.

To test this hypothesis, an SE Power score was computed for each respondent using the following procedure. First, a dyadic comparison score was computed for each respondent for each of five instances where he/she compared himself/herself with another family member. This dyadic comparison score was derived by summing the values across the five SE Power items in the comparative self-esteem scale (power, strength, confidence, independence, and intelligence). Since each scale item was set on a five-point scale, the range of dyadic comparison scores for each respondent was 1-5. Second, an average total SE Power score was computed for each respondent by summing their five dyadic comparison scores for SE Power and dividing by five. The range of values for each respondent was 5-25, with higher scores indicative of high perceived power vis-a-vis other family members.

Table 4 presents data on the ranking of mean SE Power scores according to gender and cohort or generation. As can be seen from the data in the table, the ranking of mean SE Power scores resembles the hypothesized pattern, with mean SE Power scores for female adolescents being 16.50; grandmothers, 18.02; mothers, 18.31; male adolescents, 19.00; grandfathers, 20.76; and fathers, 20.85.

Insert Table 4 About Here

Implications for Family Therapy

The data presented above provide in part empirical evidence supporting the earlier established postulate that rather definite patterns of intergenerational exchange exist and change over time (Turner, 1975). As such, one can deduce that the middle family unit (particularly the male) of the three generational system eventually emerges as the center of power or most influential unit. Usually, it is he who holds or controls many of the valued resources, or in other words, the individual on whom the other two generations depend.

Additionally, Allred (1976) presents a model which describes and explains positive (horizontal) versus negative (vertical) interactive behaviors. Horizontal behaviors are those which influence positively and thus, potentially increase feelings of self worth. On the other hand vertical behaviors are power moves to favor one party at a cost to the other. Therefore, results of the data presented in this paper also concur with this model. Horizontal behaviors (which increase self worth) are those which are the most stable.

Because the middle generation father would most likely be perceived as the more influential member (viewed as having the most stable feelings of self worth and power) within intergenerational relationships, it would seem important to observe his behavior patterns as one mode of early therapeutic intervention. Systematic observation and evaluation would then proceed from the middle to the oldest and then finally to the youngest generation.

Additionally, the instrument used in this study could become another diagnostic tool when administered to individual families. The results could help the therapist identify order of self-esteem as perceived by the group members.

Having identified the order of self-esteem (worth and power), the therapist could then spend time teaching techniques of interaction which emphasize horizontal behaviors, concentrating on change first with the individual having the greatest influence.

FIGURE 1

Self-Esteem Scale Used in Making a Comparative Self-Evaluation Between an Adolescent Respondent and a Parent (Father) Referent

For each item listed below, circle the number which describes yourself compared to your FATHER.

Less Powerful	1	2	3	4	5	More Powerful
Less Wise	1	2	3	4	5	More Wise
Less Attractive	1	2	3	4	5	More Attractive
Less Confident	1	2	3	4	5	More Confident
Less Intelligent	1	2	3	4	5	More Intelligent
Less Independent	1	2	3	4	5	More Independent
Weaker	1	2	3	4	5	Stronger
Less Helpful	1	2	3	4	5	More Helpful
Less Honest	1	2	3	4	5	More Honest
Less Dependable	1	2	3	4	5	More Dependable
Worse	1	2	3	4	5	Better

TABLE 1

Factor Loading Profile of Self-Esteem Scale

Scale Item	Varimax Rotated Factor Matrix Three Factor Solution		
	I Power	II Worth	III Attractiveness
Power	.79	.13	.11
Strength	.66	.08	.09
Confidence	.64	.1°	.08
Independence	.62	.22	01
Intelligence	.52	.21	.13
Dependable	.17	.76	.02
Helpful	.19	.67	.04
Honest	.14	.62	.07
Worse-Better	.19	.57	.19
Attractiveness	.05	.08	.68
Wisdom	.56	.47	.13
Percent Total Variance	68.2	20.6	11.2

TABLE 2

Mean Stability Scores for the Dimensions of

SE Power and SE Worth

Category	Mean Stability Scores	
	SE Power	SE Worth
ENTIRE SAMPLE	9.768	2.731
YOUNGER GENERATION	11.282	2.830
Male Sibling	12.270	3.238
Female Sibling	10.483	2.500
MIDDLE GENERATION	7.645	1.619
Father	6.259	2.097
Mother	9.031	1.140
OLDER GENERATION	10.380	3.744
Grandfather	9.535	5.108
Grandmother	11.224	2.380

TABLE 3

Mean Stability Scores for a Combined Measure of Self-Esteem by Cohort

Cohort (Generation)	Mean Stability Score for Combined Measures of Self-Esteem (SE Power and SE Worth)
YOUNGEST GENERATION	13.065
MIDDLE GENERATION	11.519
OLDEST GENERATION	16.946

TABLE 4

Mean Scores for SE Power by Gender and Cohort

Gender and Cohort	Mean Score for Measures of SE Power
FEMALE	
Youngest Generation (Female Adolescents)	16.50
Middle Generation (Mothers)	18.31
Oldest Generation (Grandmothers)	18.02
MALE	
Youngest Generation (Male Adolescent)	19.00
Middle Generation (Fathers)	20.85
Oldest Generation (Grandfathers)	20.76

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